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‘Surprise, surprise:’ The tactical response of Alexander to guerilla warfare and fighting in difficult terrain

Graham Wrightson

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Alexander the Great is most famous as the undefeated general who conquered the Persian Empire only to die suddenly in his mid-thirties. Most works on his leadership focus on his strategic brilliance or on his pitched battles and sieges. But perhaps the most striking part of Alexander’s generalship was his effective responses to irregular warfare throughout his campaigns. Alexander had to overcome numerous guerilla forces and battles in difficult terrain during his campaigns.¹

Of most interest to military historians today is his solution to dealing with the problems of invading the Hindu Kush and the regions around what is now Afghanistan in what proved to be one of the most difficult periods of Alexander’s campaign. Others have discussed well his strategic goals in these areas.² Instead this paper will examine his use of tactics on the battlefield in Asia, as well as in his other campaigns against enemies reliant on guerilla tactics or in difficult terrain. This analysis will focus on a comparison with modern counterinsurgency tactics as propounded by the current US military. I will show how Alexander’s tactics, in particular of speed and secrecy of action and tactical flexibility, were what ensured his overall strategic success, and that these are the same tactics still used to achieve success against guerilla forces today.

Current views of the tactical importance of surprise, through speed of action, and flexibility in modern COIN operations³

According to Clausewitz (3.9), “surprise lies at the root of all operations without exception,” but “surprise is a tactical device, simply because in tactics time and space are limited in scale.” As Clausewitz states (3.9), surprise comes from “secrecy and speed. Both presuppose a high degree of energy on the part of

¹ “Alexander is distinguished from all the great generals in that he was uniformly successful in every type of war. Others have equaled him as the winners of pitched battles and great sieges, but few have also been called upon to undertake what throughout the history of war have, time and again, proved to be the most intricate and difficult operations: the quelling of national risings and revolts, the suppression of partisans and guerillas, the conquest of warlike hill tribes and fleet desert nomads, and the policing and pacification of conquered territories of every description, all of which may be listed under the title of ‘Small Wars’.” Fuller, J. F. C. 1960. *The Generalship of Alexander the Great*. London, 219

² See for example Smith, P. P. 2007. “Eating Soup with a Sarissa: 10 Insurgency Prevention and Counterinsurgency Lessons From a Comparative Analysis of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Alexander the Great’s Inner Front Strategies,” A research report submitted to the faculty of the Air Command and Staff College Air University in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements. Maxwell Air Force Base; Smith, M. 2009/10. “The Failure of Alexander’s Conquest and Administration of Bactria-Sogdiana.” *Hirundo*, the McGill Journal of Classical Studies 8, 64-72; Anson, E. M. 2015. “Counter-Insurgency: The Lessons of Alexander the Great,” in T. Howe, E. Garvin, & G. Wrightson (eds.), *Greece, Macedon and Persia: Studies in the Social, Political and Military Consequences of Conquest Societies in honour of Waldemar Heckel*. Chicago.

³ I use COIN operations as the comparison for Alexander’s battles since in the modern world guerilla warfare, or small wars according to early twentieth century scholars, is manifested primarily by insurgents. The tactics of insurgents and guerillas, and those fighting in rough terrain, are almost identical. See for example some of the classic works on guerilla warfare, Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerilla Warfare* or Che Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare*.

the ... commander; on the part of the army, they require great efficiency." To continually surprise or outmaneuver an opponent throughout a long campaign requires significant training and effort. In irregular warfare this is even more important.

Numerous modern works on counterinsurgency outline the best tactics to employ on the battlefield against insurgents who use guerilla warfare. The two used extensively here as the basis for this brief summary are: D. Kilcullen. 2010. *Counterinsurgency*. Oxford and New York, and United States Army. 2009. *FM 3-24.2 Tactics in Counterinsurgency*. These works discuss operational tactics as well as battlefield tactics.⁴ The latter is my only concern here since Alexander's use of operational tactics has been discussed in works on his counterinsurgency strategy as a whole. What follows is a brief analysis, making extensive use of quotations from the two works cited above, of the main tactics to be used in battles against guerilla forces.

1. Flexibility and adaptation

The tactical success of insurgents relies on speed and surprise and the ability to adapt quickly to any actions against them: "Insurgents and terrorists evolve rapidly in response to countermeasures..."⁵ So to respond to these multiple and varied insurgent threats, "counterinsurgents must remain flexible and adaptive to engage and, if possible, disband, defeat or destroy the insurgent force from having tactical successes."⁶

The success of counterinsurgents in adapting to the situation is keeping one step ahead of the insurgent. "In counterinsurgency, the initiative is everything. If the enemy is reacting to you, you control the environment."⁷ Part of this initiative is to go on the offensive and put pressure on the insurgents. A counterinsurgency offensive requires different tactics from conventional warfare. "The characteristics of the offense are surprise, audacity, tempo,⁸ and concentration [of force]. For COIN [counterinsurgency], an additional characteristic, flexibility, is added."⁹ This flexibility is crucial especially in unfamiliar or inhospitable terrain or conditions. As Galula discusses, counterinsurgents are by nature strategically more rigid than their opponents so tactical flexibility is more important.¹⁰

⁴ For more on operational counterinsurgency tactics see: United States Department of the Army and the United States Marine Corps. 2007. *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. Chicago.

⁵ Kilcullen, D. 2010. *Counterinsurgency*. Oxford and New York, 2

⁶ United States Army. 2009. *FM 3-24.2 Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, Table 2.1. Insurgent strengths and countermeasures. Under Insurgent tactics – Countermeasures. "Thus counterinsurgency is at heart an adaptation battle: a struggle to rapidly develop and learn new techniques and apply them in a fast-moving, high-threat environment, bringing them to bear before the enemy can evolve in response, and rapidly changing as the environment shifts." Kilcullen, 2

⁷ Kilcullen, 48

⁸ Tempo "is the rate of military action relative to the insurgency. Tempo is not the same as speed. Successful COIN units control or alter tempo to maintain the initiative. Such action promotes surprise, enters the enemy's decision cycle, increases the protection of the attacking force, and decreases the insurgent's ability to defend or plan effectively." US Army, 5-5.

⁹ US Army, 5-2

¹⁰ Galula, D. 1964. *Counterinsurgency warfare: Theory and Practice*. London and New York, 12.

2. Speed of action and mobility with superior force

To be successful counterinsurgents must match the mobility of the enemy. Even if not employing surprise, it must still be possible to keep up with insurgents and track their movements. The benefit that counterinsurgents usually enjoy, and must make use of, in a highly mobile offensive operation is to be able to call for extra support and firepower when required.¹¹ Successful offensive operations are usually fast and unexpected attacks intended to deal a crushing blow to the insurgents through superior force. These are termed strike operations, where surprise is often crucial to success.¹² To be successful, the insurgents must be severely defeated by inflicting heavy losses of men and equipment, which requires significant force.¹³

Counterinsurgency tactics today are constantly being reevaluated, but the basic premise remains the same: match the insurgents for flexibility and adaptation; make use of surprise in offensive operations; use strike operations to deal crushing blows on the enemy; always maintain superior combat power within a culture of mobility; and ensure effective speed of action. In view of the importance of COIN in modern warfare it is useful to examine how these same tactics were also used in similar operations in the ancient world, and here the focus is on Alexander.

Alexander's tactics against guerilla forces or in rough terrain¹⁴

Alexander, after inheriting the throne of Macedon following his father's assassination, had to secure his position both internally and abroad. His first campaign was to subdue the Thracian and Illyrian tribes on Macedon's northern border. While away in northern Greece, Thebes revolted from the League of Corinth, the organization to control the Greek cities set up by Philip II after his victory at Chaeronea, forcing Alexander to action. After a rapid march south, Alexander took Thebes by assault and executed or enslaved most of the inhabitants. Thus secure in his rule in Macedon and Greece Alexander launched the invasion of the Persian Empire that had been planned and initiated by Philip before his death. Alexander went on to defeat Darius, the king of Persia, coming to control an empire stretching from Greece to Pakistan and the Caspian Sea to the Sahara, but died before he could establish a long lasting dynasty.

¹¹ Kilcullen, 33: "Unless you ruthlessly lighten your load and enforce a culture of speed and mobility, the insurgents will consistently outrun and outmaneuver you. But in lightening your load, make sure you can always "reach back" to call for firepower or heavy support if needed."

¹² US Army, 3-148: "Speed and surprise are important in strike operations. The sudden and unexpected delivery of combat forces into an insurgent-held or contested area provides significant advantages to the forces conducting these operations."

¹³ US Army, 3-149: "A strike on an insurgent force normally requires superior combat power."

¹⁴ As for most studies of Alexander's generalship the best primary source on military matters is the account of Arrian, the *Anabasis of Alexander*. Curtius Rufus' history of Alexander, Diodorus' one book on this period and the epitome of the history of Pompeius Trogus provided by Justin are also useful in certain places. Plutarch's various works that mention Alexander rarely offer any military insight as he was more concerned with Alexander's character.

In his various campaigns Alexander came up against a variety of fighting styles in many different terrains, all of which he was able to overcome. The focus of this paper is on Alexander's battlefield tactics against those enemies reliant on the use of guerilla warfare, hit-and-run tactics, or light missile troops, usually in mountainous or difficult terrain. Such forces usually avoided fighting pitched battles, as Darius the King of Persia or Porus, an Indian king, did.¹⁵ Instead they attempted ambushes, or relied on defending heavily fortified positions or strongholds. As such Alexander was forced to use tactics other than traditional battlefield maneuvers.

Alexander relied on speed and surprise against guerillas because they allowed him to gain, and maintain, the initiative. Alexander's tactics revolved around what are now defined as strike operations.¹⁶ Alexander's successes were founded on the superior training and ability of his soldiers providing him with significant tactical flexibility. His successful offensive operations display all of the aspects advised for modern counterinsurgency attacks. Alexander was able to defeat the enemy guerillas so successfully because he outdid them at their own game, fully utilizing a very well trained and experienced combined arms army to surprise, out-pace, out think, and overpower the mobile enemy forces.

1. Speed of movement

Alexander's chief asset in his advances into rough terrain or against guerillas was his speed of movement, enabling him to engage the enemy before they could escape or forcing them onto the back foot.¹⁷ There are numerous references throughout the Alexander historians of the enemy being taken aback by rapid advances. What follows is a brief summary of some of the most striking examples of Alexander's speed of movement.

Even proven Persian officers were surprised by Alexander's rapid response time. For example, the Persian Satibarzanes, whom Alexander had appointed satrap of Areia, rebelled and routed the Macedonian garrison in the region (Arrian 3.25.5) only to be shocked by Alexander's speed of counterattack. Alexander led a force of heavy cavalry, mounted javelin men, archers, Agrianian javelin men, and two battalions of

¹⁵ Throughout his campaigns Alexander only fought 4 large scale pitched battles: the Granicus River (against Darius' provincial army in Asia Minor), Issus, Gaugamela (both against Darius' Royal army), and the Hydaspes River (against the Indian king Porus). The majority of the military actions of Alexander's army were sieges or local campaigns of suppression involving small scale engagements. It is for this reason that his tactics against the guerilla forces involved in these multiple smaller campaigns are important.

¹⁶ "Strike operations are short duration (generally one day to several weeks) offensive, tactical operations conducted in contested or insurgent controlled urban or rural areas to find, fix and destroy insurgent forces. ...Upon locating the insurgents, commanders direct their forces to attack, pursue, and destroy them. ... Strike operations seek to destroy insurgent forces and base areas.... Strike operations use offensive tactics...." US Army, 3-147.

¹⁷ As Kilcullen, 8-9 summarizes, "a guerilla force has no permanent installations it needs to defend, and can always run away to fight another day." So "an insurgent enemy needs to be pinned against an immovable object and "fixed" in order to be destroyed."

the phalanx infantry, and covered almost 600 stades (c. 108km) in two days (Arrian 3.25.6). Satibarzanes fled and most of his supporters abandoned him without another fight (Arrian 3.25.7; Curtius 6.6.21-22).¹⁸

As with Satibarzanes, more often than not Alexander's rapid advance prompted the enemy to withdraw without a fight, especially if he led the relief force in person. In his campaign in Illyria, discussed in more detail below, Alexander's rapid response to a threat posed to his baggage train and foragers allowed him to extract his men without any loss, his approach prompting the enemy to withdraw (Arrian, 1.5.9-11). Alexander's rapid advance to Tarsus, with the cavalry and the most mobile of his light troops, prompted the Persian governor to flee before he had time to plunder the city (Arrian, 2.4.6). Mazaeus, a Persian officer, was tasked by Darius with preventing Alexander's forces building bridges across the river Euphrates near Thapsacus but he fled with all his forces once he learned of Alexander's swift march against him (Arrian, 3.7.1-2). After his success at defeating the large defensive force posted at the Persian Gates, Alexander's speed of march towards Persepolis allowed him to cross bridges before the Persians had time to destroy them and approached the city before the enemy had had time to plunder it and the Royal treasury (Arrian, 3.18.10). After the defeat of a Macedonian force by Spitamenes, as discussed below, Alexander marched at full speed to prevent Spitamenes from capturing the city of Maracanda. He took with him a flying column of half the Companion cavalry, the archers, the Agrianians, and the lightest armed of the phalanx. According to Arrian he covered 1500 stades (c. 270km) in three days (Arrian, 4.6.3-4). Spitamenes did not wait for Alexander but fled as soon as he learned of his approach and easily escaped. This incident not only shows Alexander's reliance on speed of action but also the difficulty in forcing guerillas to fight, especially when they are at a disadvantage.

If the enemy did mount any resistance it usually did not last long, and often had beneficial consequences for Alexander. Alexander's rapid attack on a Persian scouting force of cavalry was so fast and unexpected that he succeeded in capturing some soldiers despite the enemy's immediate flight (Arrian, 3.8.1-2). These prisoners provided Alexander with vital information regarding the location of Darius' main army near Gaugamela. According to Arrian, after the battle of Gaugamela, Alexander's pursuit with the cavalry was so fast that he covered 600 stades in one day and night (c. 120km), capturing all of Darius' royal treasure and military equipment including his personal battle chariot (Arrian, 3.15.5).

Often Alexander's rapid advance led to a lack of support for the enemy. Alexander's speed of march in response to the revolt at Thebes largely prevented any assistance coming to the Thebans from the other Greek cities (Arrian, 1.7.5). The Thebans apparently did not know he was coming against them until he was already through the northern pass into central Greece (either at Thermopylae or south of Heraclea) and only a small distance from Thebes itself. Alexander's reduction of Thebes was completed in such a short space of time that those cities that had sent help were taken aback and quickly sent embassies to Alexander offering submission. Some even punished their citizens who had urged them into rebellion (Arrian, 1.10.1-3).

¹⁸ Satibarzanes escaped and revolted again later revealing the problem of not eliminating the leaders of any insurgency. Alexander sent a strong force against him and his army was defeated after Satibarzanes was killed in hand-to-hand combat with the Macedonian commander (Arrian 3.28.2-3).

In difficult terrain Alexander often relied on speed to defeat the local population. Alexander overcame the Uxian tribesmen in the hills of Persia by advancing rapidly at night along a difficult and treacherous mountain pass. His advance was so fast and unexpected that he found the Uxians still asleep in their beds (Arrian, 3.17.2-3). Even after this success Alexander quickly pressed on further to fully exploit his advantage and sent a force at speed to occupy hills on the line of the Uxian retreat while he advanced to the mountain pass where he expected to face the Uxian resistance. His actions were so unexpected and his march so fast in such difficult terrain that the Uxians abandoned their guerilla tactics and fled without a fight, many of them being killed in retreat by Alexander or his support force or dying in the mountainous terrain (Arrian, 3.17.4-5).

The best example of the extent of Alexander's reliance on speed was in his pursuit of Darius. Arrian reports that Alexander's march was so fast that many of his soldiers fell behind too tired to keep up and many of the horses died from exhaustion (Arrian, 3.20.1). Once he learned that Darius had been arrested by his own soldiers, Alexander led a small force of the most mobile troops and pressed the pursuit. According to Arrian he marched for two nights and a day with only a small rest at noon, the soldiers bringing their weapons and two days' provisions (Arrian, 3.21.3). Alexander continued to follow Darius after a brief period of recovery and marched another night and morning even though his men and horses were growing very tired (Arrian, 3.21.6). Alexander then learned from locals of a shortcut along a desert road without water and advanced with a select force of mounted troops only, replacing 500 tiring cavalry troopers with the fittest of the infantry carrying their infantry weapons. The other soldiers were to follow in two groups, one a flying column of infantry with the lightest possible equipment and the other advancing in normal order (3.21.7-8). Alexander's force, according to Arrian, covered up to 400 stades (c. 72km) during the night and came upon the disordered Persians, who had abandoned most of their equipment to aid their flight. Most of the Persians fled without fighting and the senior officers galloped off with 600 cavalry leaving Darius mortally wounded in a carriage (Arrian, 3.21.9-10).

Alexander also sent his generals in forced marches. Ptolemy, the future Pharaoh of Egypt, in his first major independent command was sent by Alexander to receive the surrender of Bessus in Bactria. Ptolemy led a mobile force of three squadrons of heavy cavalry, the mounted javelin men, one phalanx battalion, one thousand hypaspists, the Agrianians and half the archers. According to Arrian this force covered ten days' marches in only four days (Arrian, 3.29.7). On arrival at a small village Ptolemy was informed that the enemy was close by so he advanced at speed with just the cavalry and succeeded in capturing the fugitive Bessus (Arrian, 3.30.1-2). The most successful rapid attack carried out by Alexander's officers against guerillas was against a force of Scythian horse archers, the Massagetae. Craterus advanced at such speed that despite the flight of the Scythians towards the desert, he was still able to overcome them and force them to battle. Arrian states that a hundred and fifty Scythians were killed before the rest fled into the desert (Arrian, 4.17.1-2).

2. Surprise¹⁹

¹⁹ On the use of ambush and surprise in earlier Greek warfare see in particular Sheldon, R. M. 2012. *Ambush: Surprise Attack in Ancient Greek Warfare*. London.

Surprise attacks on an enemy's position were what really aided Alexander. Alexander's first campaign to subdue Thrace and Illyria was met with resistance by various local tribes whose traditional method of fighting was in irregular warfare using light troops to harass the enemy through guerilla tactics. In each case Alexander relied on surprise and swiftness of action to suppress any resistance. In his first campaign in northern Greece, a light and mobile infantry and cavalry force of Thracians had gathered across the Danube River. Alexander promptly crossed the river at night with a force of 4000 infantry and 1500 cavalry on improvised boats and rafts, some made from skins stuffed with hay, and attacked the enemy camp just after dawn (Arrian 1.3.5-1.4.3). The surprise attack was so effective that the Thracians fled instantly and most of the local tribes quickly brought tokens of submission.²⁰

Especially when at a strategic disadvantage, Alexander used surprise to his benefit. Later in the same campaign in northern Greece Alexander was placed in great difficulty when trapped between two Illyrian kings' large armies, one in a city and the other on the heights behind. Alexander did not have the numbers to deal with both at the same time, especially in unfamiliar terrain against an enemy that was extremely mobile and primarily reliant on hit-and-run tactics in rugged terrain. He had to devise a way of dislodging the one without being attacked by the other before he became trapped. His solution was to surprise the enemy by calmly executing numerous drill maneuvers. He drew up his phalanx and cavalry wings on the plain below the heights and drilled the army silently in full view of the Illyrians. The enemy descended the hill to watch and fled on the instant that Alexander's force moved to attack them, according to Arrian on account of their surprise and awe at the expertise of the Macedonian army (Arrian 1.5.11-1.6.4).²¹ Despite this setback the Illyrians held the advantage over Alexander in knowledge of the terrain and speed of movement.

The Illyrians still held a hill on Alexander's line of march away from the city. His position, according to Arrian, was bounded by hills on one side and a river on the other so that to cross the river his rear would be exposed to those in the hills (Arrian 1.5.12). To force the Illyrians from their position Alexander sent a force of heavy cavalry against them with orders to engage the enemy cavalry on foot if they stood their ground (Arrian 1.6.5). The enemy redeployed to hills on either side while Alexander had to cross the river. Alexander remained on the hill previously occupied by the Illyrians in order to observe the enemy while he sent the light infantry across the river at the head of the hypaspists and the phalanx. When the Illyrians charged down to attack the rear, Alexander's own party on the hill counterattacked and the phalanx turned to threaten to retrace its steps into an attack and catch the Illyrians between the two Macedonian forces (Arrian 1.6.6-7). The lightly armed Illyrians fled and Alexander succeeded in crossing the river while suffering no losses by shielding his rearguard with missiles, from the artillery on the bank and from the archers midstream (Arrian 1.6.7-8). Although not a clear use of surprise, it does demonstrate the tactical flexibility of Alexander's army, as discussed below. I place it here to keep it within the context of the

²⁰ The Thracians were almost always light infantry. They usually had little training or organization and relied on hit-and-run or ambush tactics and avoiding pitched battles against heavier forces. See Hoddinott, R. F. 1981. *The Thracians*. London; Webber, C. 2011. *The Gods of Battle: The Thracians at War, 1500 BC - 150 AD*. Barnsley.

²¹ The Illyrians, just as the Thracians, usually relied on light infantry and had very little training or organization in battle. See Wilkes, J. 1992. *The Illyrians*. Cambridge, MA.

Illyrian campaign as a whole and as an explanation for the subsequent carefree bivouacking of the Illyrians, who believed Alexander was withdrawing completely.

Alexander's final victory over the Illyrian forces was won entirely by a surprise maneuver. He attacked both armies once they had united by assaulting their undefended camp at night after they thought he had retreated in panic (Arrian 1.6.9-11).²² To maintain the surprise and to achieve a crushing blow, Alexander advanced with a flying column consisting of his best light troops (the Agrianian javelin men) the archers, his best and most mobile heavy infantry unit (the hypaspists) and two phalanx battalions. In the attack itself Alexander only required the use of the Agrianians and the archers to overcome the enemy who were still in their beds. We are not told how Alexander had learned of their location and carefree dispositions, but clearly Alexander had an excellent source of information gathering, also crucial in counterinsurgency operations.²³

Alexander also achieved surprise by advancing into unexpected areas. After finally overtaking Darius' body, Alexander invaded the territory of the Mardians in Hyrcania, on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. Arrian states that the inhabitants of this region were poor but warlike and no one before had invaded their lands (Arrian, 3.24.2). They lived in a mountainous region and, being poor, almost certainly fought as light infantry using guerilla tactics.²⁴ Alexander's force was the most mobile he could field while maintaining excellent strike power: hypaspists, archers, Agrianians, two phalanx battalions, half the Companion cavalry and the battalion of mounted javelin men (Arrian, 3.24.1). Alexander advanced right through the region killing and capturing many of the local inhabitants, and when he approached the Mardians' last strongholds in the high mountains the Mardians quickly surrendered (Arrian, 3.24.3). In this instance the surprise Alexander achieved against guerillas was not an unnoticed attack but an advance into such difficult terrain that no one else had even attempted such an action. The result was the same and the tactics Alexander used, in relying on a mobile but strong force, are a perfect example of how to deal with guerilla warfare.

There is one instance during Alexander's campaign that perfectly demonstrates the effectiveness of surprise against guerillas but the problem of avoiding an ambush in retaliation. Spitamenes was continuing a rebellion against Alexander in northern Bactria and had gathered a force of Scythian horse archers who relied on hit-and-run tactics. Spitamenes had captured a fort and advanced to threaten the nearby city of Zariaspa. There the Macedonian garrison sallied and killed many of the Scythians and took their plunder after catching them entirely by surprise. However, on their return to Zariaspa the Macedonian force was

²² For Alexander's campaign in Illyria Hammond, N. G. L. 1974. "Alexander's Campaign in Illyria," *JHS* 94: 66-87. Hammond, N. G. L. 1977. "The Campaign of Alexander against Cleitus and Glaucias," in *Ancient Macedonia II*. Thessaloniki: 503-509.

²³ "In no class of warfare is a well organized and well served intelligence department more essential than in against guerillas." Callwell, Col. C. E. 1896. *Small Wars: Their principles and practice*. Lincoln, NE. On Alexander's intelligence gathering see in particular Engels, D. 1980. "Alexander's intelligence system." *CQ* 30 327-340. See Engels, D. W. 1978. *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, for Alexander's logistics.

²⁴ In Herodotus' list of units in Xerxes' army (7.61-81) the Hyrcanians were equipped as infantry archers.

itself ambushed by the surviving Scythians and lost all the plunder and at least 67 of their number (Arrian, 4.16.6-7).

Surprise was also used by Alexander when attacking heavily fortified positions. Although not evidence of his tactics on the battlefield against guerillas, the type of enemy soldiers and terrain involved was similar and demonstrates his enthusiasm for utilizing surprise in conflict. The most important surprise attack for his overall success was the attack on the mountain pass into Persia called the Persian Gates. Here Alexander had attempted to surprise the enemy through a rapid advance but found the pass guarded by a strong force of perhaps 40,000 men and a large wall that the Persians had built in the way.²⁵ A violent direct assault failed and Alexander was forced to look for an alternate route (Arrian 3.18.2-3; Curtius 5.3.17-23). Prisoners, or a local herdsman, informed Alexander of secret tracks through the woods over the mountain, but which could only be traversed in single file.²⁶ Alexander personally led a flying column following the guide and, once in position, having approached at night and overtaken the pickets, at a prearranged signal launched a combined assault on the enemy formation from front and rear and cut down most of the Persian force (Arrian 3.18.4-9; Curtius 5.4.1-34). Surprise in this action was more important than speed as it prevented the enemy from escaping the trap.²⁷ This maneuver is reminiscent of the Persian army's march around Thermopylae in 480. Had Xerxes' forces managed to surprise Leonidas' position as Alexander did at the Persian Gates, then most of the 7,000 strong Greek army would have perished not just the 300 Spartans, 700 Thespians and 1,500 Thebans of the rearguard.

The most spectacular use of surprise in difficult terrain by Alexander was during his campaign against Sogdiana. There he was forced to attack a mountain, precipitous on all sides and with a strong force of local soldiers, again predominantly light troops, at the top. Alexander could not hope to succeed easily in a frontal attack and so relied exclusively on surprise. He asked for mountain climbers and sent the 300 volunteers at night to climb the rock. When the 270 survivors appeared at the top of the mountain the next day the local inhabitants were shocked enough to surrender their position without a fight (Arrian 4.18.5-4.19.4; Curtius 7.11.1-29). This shows not only the effect surprise can have on the morale of the enemy, who expected to be doing the surprising, in this case safe in a secure mountain stronghold, but also the benefits of such action in reducing losses to the minimal.

3. Light missile troops, mobility and flexibility of tactical action

The victory over the Illyrians, as described above, fully demonstrates the importance of Alexander's use of surprise and speed of action. What is also evident is the superior training of Alexander's army, as well as the importance of missiles. It is no coincidence that the few occasions where Alexander used artillery,

²⁵ Earlier in his campaign Alexander had adopted the same surprise tactic in order to get through the Cilician Gates leading a force of hypaspists, archers and the Agrianian javelin men. On this occasion he had advanced at night in an effort to maximise the surprise but was detected nonetheless. It still worked to his advantage when the enemy fled from their position not wanting to face Alexander in person (Arrian 2.4.3-4).

²⁶ Arrian 3.18.4; Diodorus 17.68.5; Curtius 5.4.3-13; Plutarch *Alexander* 37.1; Polyaeus 4.3.27 – Bosworth, A. B. 1980a. *A Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander*. vol. 1. Oxford, 326 thinks the herdsman is more likely.

²⁷ Alexander had also detached a force from his flying column to the plains below should the enemy have abandoned their position before he could hem them in.

other than in a siege, were against guerillas to support river crossings or to scare the enemy away.²⁸ The only occasions that we know of where Alexander used artillery in battle was to cover his withdrawal against the Illyrians, as discussed above,²⁹ and to cover his crossing of the river Jaxartes in Sogdiana against the Scythians, as discussed below.³⁰ On both occasions Alexander used artillery to cover the difficult and lengthy crossing of a river in the face of enemy fire. He needed to force back the enemy using missiles to screen his river crossing.

In the ancient world, armies formed from locals in rough terrain usually relied on light troops, both horse and foot. Even in Greece in areas where there was virtually no flat land, such as Aetolia, hoplites were spurned in favour of light armed missile infantry.³¹ In northern Greece before the late fifth century even flat areas such as Macedon and Thrace fielded armies principally consisting of light missile infantry and occasionally achieved great success against armies reliant on heavy infantry and more traditional pitched battle tactics.³² For example, the battle of Spartolus in 429 during the Peloponnesian War was decided by light infantry (Thucydides 2.79).³³ This was a resounding success for lightly armed missile troops in defeating hoplites using hit-and-run tactics and demonstrates the expertise of Thracians in that style of guerrilla warfare.³⁴ Therefore to defeat these forces reliant on hit-and-run tactics invading armies often had to adopt the same types of tactics, using missiles extensively.

In the mountainous terrain of Illyria, Alexander made extensive use of local troops (the Agrarian javelin men who became some of his most important soldiers) and archers. In the flat plains and hills of central Asia, where missile troops were most prominent, Alexander probably also relied heavily on light troops, but not solely.³⁵ Whenever he needed a rapid response force, Alexander almost always sent the most

²⁸ Marsden, E. W. 1969. *Greek and Roman Artillery I: Historical Development*. Oxford: 164-8 outlines all the instances of the use of field artillery in the Greek world. Marsden notes that there were no mobile catapults until the introduction of the *carroballista* in 100 CE. See Keyser, P. T. 1994. "The Use of Artillery by Philip II and Alexander the Great," *AncW* 25: 27-59 for Philip and Alexander's use of artillery.

²⁹ Arrian, 1.6.8.

³⁰ Arrian, 4.4.4. Curtius, 7.9.1-16

³¹ For the style of warfare practiced in Aetolia as viewed by Messenians at Naupactus see Thucydides 3.94.3-5. The clearest example of the Aetolian expertise in guerilla warfare was the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War suffered at Aegitium in 426 (Thucydides 3.97-98). For more on the Aetolians and this battle see in particular Roisman, J. 1993. *The General Demosthenes and His Use of Military Surprise*. *Historia Einzelschriften* 78. Stuttgart.

³² Best, J. G. P. 1969. *Thracian Peltasts and their influence on Greek Warfare*. Groningen; Griffith, G. 1981. "Peltast and the origins of the Macedonian phalanx," in H. Dell, ed. *Ancient Macedonian studies in honour of Charles F. Edson*. Thessaloniki: 161-7; Hammond, N. G. L. 1989. *The Macedonian State. Origins, Institutions and History*. Oxford; and Webber.

³³ The Athenian contingent marching against the Chalcidians was 2,000 hoplites and 200 cavalry. The citizens of Spartolus, after receiving reinforcements from Olynthus, sallied out to fight the Athenians. The Chalcidian hoplites were quickly routed but their cavalry and light troops easily routed the Athenian cavalry. After receiving reinforcements of more light infantry from Olynthus the Chalcidian missile infantry attacked the Athenian hoplites using hit and run tactics, falling back when the Athenians charged only to attack again when they fell back. These tactics added to repeated charges by their cavalry caused the Athenians to retreat which turned quickly into a rout. Over 430 Athenian hoplites died along with all of their generals.

³⁴ See Webber.

³⁵ "Unfortunately Arrian and the other historians tell us little about the tactical changes Alexander introduced [in Central Asia] although we may assume that there was a considerable expansion of light troops, both foot and horse.... Whatever the changes, one thing is certain, they were based on mobility and flexibility,..." Fuller, 117. On

mobile of his heavy infantry or cavalry as firepower support along with his light troops when in pursuit of guerilla forces or for surprise attacks.³⁶ Alexander realized the necessity of mobility in using light troops while also ensuring a superiority of strength of arms.

4. Tactical adaptability

Crucially, Alexander's successes against guerilla warfare stemmed from his own tactical adaptability. Able to field a fully integrated combined arms army, Alexander had many types of unit to use in battle. This meant that there was no tactical problem that could not be solved using his army. This tactical flexibility is visible throughout Alexander's campaigns. The first notable occasion was an attack uphill against a force of Thracians. These local tribesmen had prepared wagons to launch down the hill at Alexander's army and disrupt his formation before the onset of the Thracian attack.³⁷ On seeing the wagons Alexander knew what was in store and adapted his tactics accordingly. He ordered the phalanx infantry to make lanes for the wagons to pass through and told the hypaspists to lie down under their shields and allow everything to bounce over them.³⁸ On the flanks of his heavy infantry Alexander posted his missile troops. Once the wagons had passed, Alexander ordered the missile troops in front of the heavy infantry to hinder the expected charge of the Thracians and allow his men time to regroup and face the oncoming enemy. The

Alexander's reorganization of the army in Central Asia see in particular Bosworth, A. B. 1989. *Conquest and Empire. The Reign of Alexander the Great*. Cambridge; Heckel, W. 2002. *The Wars of Alexander the Great: 336-323 BC*. Oxford; Heckel, W. 2008. *The Conquests of Alexander the Great*, Cambridge. On Alexander's strategy and general campaign in this area see Bosworth, A. B. 1980b. "Alexander and the Iranians," *JHS* 100: 1-21; Bosworth, A. B. 1983. "The Indian satrapies under Alexander the Great." *Antichthon* 17, 37-46; Bosworth, A. B. 1996. *Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph*. Oxford and New York; Holt, F. L. 1989 [1995]. *Alexander the Great and Bactria. The Formation of a Greek Frontier in Central Asia*. Mnemosyne 104. Supplementum. Leiden and New York; Heckel, W. 2003. "Alexander and the 'Limits of the Civilised World'," in W. Heckel and L. Tritle (eds.) *Crossroads of History: The Age of Alexander*. Claremont, CA. 147-74; Holt, F. L. 2005. *Into the Land of Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan*. Berkeley and Los Angeles.

³⁶ See, for example, Alexander's personally led assault force at the Persian Gates (Arrian 3.18.4-9; Curtius 5.4.1-34), against Telmessian light infantry holding a mountain pass (Arrian, 1.27.7-8), his flying column against the Cilician Gates (Arrian 2.4.3), and against the Illyrian camp (Arrian 1.6.9), or the way Alexander trapped the Scythian horse archers between light troops and his heavy cavalry at the Jaxartes (Arrian 4.4.6-7).

³⁷ English, S. 2011. *The Field Campaigns of Alexander the Great*. Barnsley, 22-5 seems to doubt that the Thracians intended to charge immediately after the wagons. But the only tactical benefit the Thracians would have had from releasing the wagons was to break up the Macedonian formation so that they were vulnerable to a charge of the lightly armed Thracian infantry. Alexander did not post the missile troops in front of his reforming heavy forces just in case the Thracians charged, but rather specifically to ward off the Thracian charge. English, 24 supposes a delay in the reforming of the heavy infantry as an explanation for Arrian's account (1.1.7-9) of repeated Thracian assaults warding off by the missile troops. But these attacks would have followed immediately after the wagons in order to gain maximum effect no matter how quickly the Macedonians reformed.

³⁸ It is unlikely, though not impossible, that the infantry were armed with sarissas in such a small space especially on rough terrain. Arrian (1.1.7) here uses the term hoplites not phalangites. The hypaspists definitely fought with the traditional hoplite panoply and so would be able to lie under their interlocking shields, just as Arrian describes. It is possible that Alexander only required the hypaspists for this relatively small engagement, but if the sarissa phalanx was present then these men must definitely have advanced over the most level ground available on the approach to the Thracian position. See Heckel, W. 2005b. "Synaspismos, Sarissas and Wagons," *Acta Classica* 48: 189-94.

whole army then assaulted the Thracians at the top of the hill and easily forced them into retreating down the other side (Arrian 1.1.4-13).³⁹

Other battles show Alexander using deployments or maneuvers to draw the enemy away from their strong positions into vulnerable situations. Against the Triballi in Thrace, Alexander came upon their camp by the river and they drew up for battle in a glen, a location that would favour their light armed guerilla tactics. Alexander deployed his missile infantry in front of his line to draw the Triballi out into the open. Once they were exposed in the plain Alexander launched his cavalry on either flank and advanced the phalanx in the centre. Once the battle was engaged in close quarters the lightly armoured Triballi quickly fled (Arrian 1.2.4-7). In battle against the Assacenians in central Asia, Alexander drew the enemy army away from the safety of their city by feigning a withdrawal to a nearby hill. As soon as the enemy were within missile range Alexander turned his army around and launched his missile troops, both horse and foot, to attack the disordered Assacenians. The enemy fled back to the city leaving around 200 of their number dead (Arrian 4.26.1-4). Although this skirmish was not against guerillas and was not a decisive victory (Alexander spent the next 4 days besieging the city until he received its surrender Arrian, 4.6.5-4.27.2), it does demonstrate the ease with which a trained force can gain the upper-hand over less well trained forces by using surprise and perfectly executed maneuvers. The feigned withdrawal was one of the principal tactics used by the Macedonian armies of Philip and Alexander and later perhaps became standard practice in all Hellenistic armies.⁴⁰ Neither of these battles relied on the use of surprise, but both demonstrate the Macedonian army's ability at employing relatively complicated tactical maneuvers at a moment's notice in unfamiliar terrain against an enemy that is proficient at guerilla warfare. This is the hallmark of maintaining tactical flexibility against the enemy.

Perhaps the most telling example of Alexander's tactical success in guerilla warfare was against the horse archers of the Scythians at the River Jaxartes. In pitched battles the tactics of horse archers are to approach the enemy and ride in circles loosing arrows and withdrawing before the battle can be joined at close quarters.⁴¹ These tactics are inordinately successful. History is littered with examples of many powerful armies succumbing to them. The most famous is probably Carrhae in 53 BCE where the Parthian cavalry annihilated the Roman army of Crassus.⁴² Other examples are spread throughout ancient and medieval history, such as Manzikert in 1071, the Horns of Hattin in 1187 and Mohi in 1241. Numerous armies, usually from the Steppe region or central Asia, relied on horse archers, most notably the Parthians, the Sassanid Persians, the Turks and other medieval Muslim armies, and the Mongols. A detachment of Alexander's army, when not under his command, suffered a devastating loss at the hands of the Scythian horse archers. Under the command of the translator Pharnuces (according to Arrian – the soldier

³⁹ See Heckel 2005b.

⁴⁰ See in particular Wrightson, G. 2013. *Greek and Near Eastern warfare 3000 to 301: the development and perfection of combined arms*. PhD Thesis University of Calgary; Bar Kochva, B. 1976. *The Seleucid Army*. Cambridge; Pietrykowski, J. 2009. *Great Battles of the Hellenistic World*. Barnsley.

⁴¹ See Syvanne, I. 2004. *The Age of the Hippotoxotai*. Tampere.

⁴² See Sampson, G. 2008. *The defeat of Rome in the East: Crassus, the Parthians, and the Disastrous Battle of Carrhae, 53 BC*. Havertown, PA, among others.

Menedemus according to Curtius),⁴³ a force of 860 cavalry and 1500 mercenaries were almost wiped out by Areians led by Spitamenes (Arrian, 4.5.3-4.6.2; cf. Curtius, 7.7.30-39). Without a general able to adapt tactically even the Macedonians were unable to cope with the hit and run tactics of the circling horse archers.

At the same time as this defeat Alexander was opposed by another force of Scythian horse archers. He was in the process of founding a city on the River Jaxartes to function as his northern border and to control the local population. While there, the local Scythians gathered and harassed the Macedonians from across the river (Arrian, 4.4.1). Alexander determined to attack, not only to remove them from the vicinity but also to impress upon the locals the power of the new Macedonian governors. He first had to cross the river under a hail of “such a great amount of arrows...that there was hardly a shield that was not pierced by many of their points...” (Curtius, 7.9.8, Loeb translation by J. C. Rolfe). To force back the Scythians on the far side he either placed siege artillery on rafts protected by men with shields or placed his artillery on the riverbank.⁴⁴ Under the covering fire of the artillery rafts of the missile infantry crossed the river, while the rest of the army followed either in rafts or on skins stuffed with hay, with the horses swimming. The rowers were protected by shield bearers (Curtius, 7.9.1-16 provides all these great details about the crossing but little about the subsequent battle). The Scythians expected to make easy work of the men crowded in the rafts but Alexander’s artillery took its toll and the death of a Scythian from a catapult bolt caused them to withdraw a little way from the bank (Arrian, 4.4.4). This allowed Alexander to land his missile troops to further harass the Scythians while the rest of the army landed.

Once on land, Alexander advanced against the Scythians, who still expected to win using their normal circling tactics. Alexander sent forward an advance force of light cavalry who were quickly encircled and attacked by the Scythians in their usual manner (Arrian, 4.4.6). Alexander then mixed his light infantry with the rest of his light cavalry and sent them forwards, while the Companions and mounted javelin men advanced on the wings of the army to outflank the Scythians (Arrian, 4.4.7). The Scythians were unable to wheel in circles with ease and so fled at the onset of close quarter fighting. Fuller provides an excellent discussion and tactical map of this engagement.⁴⁵ Alexander achieved a resounding victory, impressively forcing a crossing of a river and then easily defeating an enemy whose style of battle was treacherous for numerous commanders before and since.

⁴³ See Heckel, W. 2005a. *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander*. Oxford. There is some debate as to why Alexander sent out the expedition under the command of a non-military local expert. Perhaps the reason lies in one possible solution to insurgencies: local knowledge and linguistic connection. “Linguists are a battle-winning asset” as Kilcullen, 32 outlines in his advice for counterinsurgency today. Alexander was trying a different method of counterinsurgency, to undermine local support for the guerillas and to maximize the local knowledge of his own forces in unfamiliar terrain.

⁴⁴ Curtius (7.9) states that Alexander placed his artillery on rafts in the middle of the river. The great range of the missiles, as described by Arrian, suggests the machines were set up on the bank. Since they were intended to only support the crossing until Alexander could land his archers ahead of his other units, the machines would not need to have been taken across the river. Remaining on the bank they could fire over the heads of Alexander’s soldiers until the beachhead was established well enough for the archers and Agrianian javelin men to take over the missile bombardment.

⁴⁵ Fuller, 238-241

Unfortunately the sources do not provide any tactical details about the final defeat of Spitamenes by Alexander's general Koinos, except that Spitamenes was forced into fighting a pitched battle because all the local strongholds were in Macedonian hands. Arrian (4.17.4-6) states that over 800 of Spitamenes' cavalry fell in the battle. This is more than were killed in either Craterus' or Alexander's defeat of the Scythians and perhaps suggests that Spitamenes relied in this engagement as much on heavy cavalry and perhaps infantry as horse archers. Whatever tactics Koinos employed, the victory proves that the Macedonian army's tactical flexibility in unfavourable terrain or circumstances was not just through Alexander's leadership but was prevalent also in his experienced senior officers.

Conclusion

Alexander and his soldiers, then, were able to overcome any tactical obstacle they came across, whether against guerilla warfare or against a significantly larger enemy army in difficult terrain. But for Alexander, perhaps more than any other ancient commander before him, surprise, speed of action, and flexibility were the key components of his successes. As Fuller summarizes well, Alexander used surprise in all of his actions in difficult terrain whether against fortified positions or light-armed guerilla forces:

“Alexander drew the Triballians into battle by a ruse; surprised the Getae by an unexpected crossing of the Danube; threw Glaucias off guard by a ceremonial parade; captured Pelion by an unlooked-for night attack; surprised the Uxian hillmen while asleep in their villages; re-took Cyropolis at an unsuspected point; lured the Scythians into battle by an inviting bait; captured the Sogdian Rock by scaling its most precipitous side; drew the Assacenians into battle by a feint withdrawal; and fell upon the Malli unexpectedly by crossing a waterless desert. Further, whenever it was possible, he attacked the hillmen during the winter months, when the snow kept them in their villages. The economy of force derived from these surprisals was enormous; without them his army would have rapidly melted away.”⁴⁶

It was Alexander's tactical flexibility, and excellently trained professional army, that allowed him to use surprise, and speed of action, so effectively against guerillas. The Macedonian army under its experienced generals (Philip, Alexander and a number of the Successors) excelled tactically in all situations and was able to employ surprise attacks or difficult maneuvers successfully because of the professional nature of the soldiers and commanders at all levels. To defeat guerilla forces tactically surprise and speed of action are required, but with minimal strain and loss. In this way better trained and equipped armies can cope with and overcome most of the problems associated with irregular warfare. Alexander was untroubled by guerillas and unfamiliar locations or methods of warfare because he was able to adapt tactically as a general, and his army was efficient and professional enough to handle anything it was asked to do. He could turn any position to his benefit and defeat the enemy at their own game using secrecy and speed to gain complete surprise, despite the inherent difficulties in doing so.

⁴⁶ Fuller, 301

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